

Page Denied

Next 5 Page(s) In Document Denied

**ELMO ZUMWALT/
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Panama plight predicted

A matter of critical importance to U.S. security — one which, depending on the outcome, may well alter U.S. defense strategy for generations — looms over us with the advent of the new year.

We well may find during 1988 that the outcome of the current unrest in Panama is of far more consequence to us than any arms control agreement with the Soviets or any summit meeting between President Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev in Moscow.

While the structural foundation of the relationship between the United States and Panama has appeared solid for many decades, severe cracks in that foundation are now coming to light.

Panamanian dictator Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega is struggling to preserve his control in that country. He is being pressured to move toward democracy, not only by opposition groups at home but by the United States.

The strategic importance of Panama lies in its canal, which stretches 51 miles across the isthmus. It is an important element in U.S. naval strategy, as it enables vessels, including battleships (but not aircraft carriers) to pass readily from one ocean to the other.

Treaties with Panama dating back to 1903 have given the United States a perpetual right exclusively to use, occupy and control the Canal Zone and to exercise sovereignty within the entire 10-mile-wide Canal Zone. As this arrangement had always been a source of irritation to Panamanians, in 1977 a new agreement was reached returning territorial sovereignty in the Canal Zone to Panama but allowing the United States to continue managing, operating and maintaining the canal until Dec. 31, 1999. After that, no nation other than Panama may operate the canal or maintain military installations.

It now appears that almost simultaneously with reaching this agreement the Panamanian government, then headed by the late Gen. Omar Torrijos, was beginning to supply arms to Marxist Salvadoran guerrillas, a process in which Gen. Noriega was also involved. While this arms flow was drastically reduced in 1982 in light of U.S. pressure, recent reports by a Nicaraguan defector indicate that Gen. Noriega is again dealing with the Marxists.

But profits generated by these arms deals are, apparently, not the only questionable activity in which Gen. Noriega has involved himself. He has been assisting Colombian drug dealers in getting their "product" to various markets, including the United States.

Gen. Noriega's decision to continue providing weapons to the Salvadoran Marxists is seen as one of several desperate initiatives to obtain funds with which to stabilize his own situation.

Other initiatives reportedly include seeking emergency economic assistance from Libya, seeking political support from Marxist groups, by whom he wants to be portrayed as a "nationalist leader" — that is, a Third World dictator — and, most ominously, offering landing rights and drydock facilities to Soviet airliners and fishing vessels.

The general has earned a reputation for ruthlessness; he would not hesitate, we believe, to smash his opposition brutally if his survival hung in the balance. We further believe that while he may give the appearance in the months ahead of working slowly to placate opposition leaders, he will be moving quickly to re-establish his authority.

We predict the new year will present Mr. Reagan a very difficult decision concerning Panama. As political unrest intensifies, Gen. Noriega will move openly to stamp out all remaining opposition in his country. The president will have to decide between idly standing by, knowing the general will continue his left-wing dealings, eventually endangering U.S. access to the canal, or taking affirmative action, most likely by committing U.S. forces — to protect U.S. security interests in the canal and to assist in the popular outcry by the Panamanian people for a move toward democracy.

Freedom for a tyrannized people and the capability of the United States to transfer its limited naval forces from one ocean to the other quickly will hang on that decision.

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Page Denied

Next 1 Page(s) In Document Denied

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